

Community Dialog on Gang Activity and Revitalization Issues
in the Heritage/Annandale Area of Braddock District
Wednesday, May 12, 2004, 5:00-7:00 p.m.

The meeting was convened at 5:05 p.m. by Braddock District Supervisor Sharon Bulova. Supervisor Bulova provided background information about the community dialog meetings, reiterating the importance of a strong, cohesive community in order to prevent gang activity. She said that while earlier programs had dealt with identifying the problem of gang activity and existing prevention and intervention programs, this meeting would deal with community-building programs. Attractive, strong communities, where people know each other, do things together and look out for each other are not fertile grounds for illegal activities.

Paula Sampson, Director of the Department of Housing and Community Development, discussed revitalization programs and initiatives. Ms. Sampson noted that the Housing and Redevelopment Authority had extensive powers under Virginia law with regard to revitalization and redevelopment of aging neighborhoods. She explained the process of deterioration and its affect on a community, including its market activity and the perception of crime and gang activity. Sampson indicated that commercial revitalization was essential in terms of the economic health of a community. She also reviewed the areas and programs involved in the process, to include business promotions, mixed use (redevelopment with mixed commercial and residential sites), housing and various home loan programs.

Margo Kiely, Director of the Department of Systems Management for Human Services, discussed the softer, "people" side of the process of revitalization in terms of gangs and the involvement of the police, courts and community. Kiely cited the need for community attachment and family education about gangs and their culture. She spoke of the dangers of isolation and how that creates problems for a community. Margo asked the audience if they were familiar with the regular Washington Post feature article "Where We Live" and remarked that people invariably said they loved their neighborhood, not because they had "great curb and gutters", but because of how warm and friendly their neighbors were. Margo discussed the development of resiliency in people and cautioned against over diagnosis of a problem.

Tom Overocker, also of the Department of Housing and Community Development, described how revitalization programs (e.g. Strengthening Communities, Community "Colleges") had been successful in the Springfield area. That area is a diverse community where communication problems between residents and businesses, as well as property maintenance issues, have been addressed successfully in the past.

Some people from the audience expressed impatience that they had attended the meeting mainly to hear about the Re-Planning of Ossian Hall Park. Supervisor Bulova replied that speakers had been invited to discuss several revitalization programs, and when their presentations were completed the Ossian Hall Park discussion would be next. Tom Overocker finished his presentation.

Acting Police Chief Suzanne Devlin provided a brief update concerning the May 10 gang-related machete incident, assuring the community that the Fairfax County Police Department was

actively searching for suspects in this case and intended to have the individual(s) in custody within 48 hours.

Supervisor Bulova then turned the floor over to Winnie Shapiro, the Braddock District representative to the Fairfax County Park Authority Board. She discussed the replanning of Ossian Hall Park by reviewing the Master Plan revision draft. Shapiro explained that a task force had been convened about a year ago to consider changes to the Master Plan. At its initial community meeting, issues concerning safety had been identified as a priority. The task force determined that there was a need for a more open park that would be accessible, safe and welcoming to the community. Angie Allen, project manager for the Ossian Hall Park redesign, provided a slide presentation of the proposed Master Plan revisions to Ossian Hall Park, focusing on the creation of a safe environment that the community could use and enjoy. The new Plan involved the clearing of underbrush and “limbing up” trees to create a more open view into the park. Some trees would be cleared to provide an additional athletic field, a small skate park area, and public plaza. The task force had completed its work this spring, and the Park Authority held a Public Hearing on revisions to the plan in March. If the Park Authority Board adopts these revisions to the Ossian Hall Park Master Plan, the park would become Fairfax County’s first example of an “urban park,” Shapiro explained.

Supervisor Bulova said that a positive factor in the Re-Master Planning process was that people got involved and worked together to improve their community. Several people in the audience said that they did not want to see any trees removed from the park. Others raised objections to the skate park which appeared on the new plan.

Members of the audience were asked to organize themselves into facilitated discussion groups for the Community Discussion portion of the agenda. Rick Rio of the Sierra Club objected and wished to read a statement. Supervisor Bulova said that the school cafeteria was only available for a short amount of remaining time and suggested instead that one of the discussion groups could focus solely on the park issue for those in the audience who had come for that reason only. Annandale High School principal Rod Manuel facilitated the “Park” group. The rest of the audience was asked to focus their discussion on the question listed on the program “How can neighbors work together to reconcile cultural differences and build a cohesive, vital community?”

The Community Dialog audience was brought back into full session at about 6:45 PM and discussion group facilitators reported on discussion in their respective groups. The following are ideas/comments from the groups:

- It is important that people get involved in their neighborhoods.
- We must show respect for others and provide viable alternatives to young people who become involved in gang activity.
- Food is always a good idea when bringing people together.
- It’s important to reach out and involve older people in the community, especially immigrant families.
- Kids can serve as translators for their non-English speaking parents.
- Consider parent-to-parent teas and coffees.

- Focus on commonalities through churches and sports.
- School mediators serve a great purpose in helping to settle disputes.
- Consider time honored community-building events such as block parties.
- Host international events in the community and schools.
- Help people to know what county resources already exist to assist with problems.
- Look at reorganizing community associations and by-laws.
- Organize neighborhood welcome wagon program.
- Create a Mentoring Program where established members of the community are paired up with new families to help them feel welcome and to become assimilated into the neighborhood.
- Concern expressed about what our community is. Concern about new plans for Ossian Hall Park.
- Build bridges between faith communities and other organizations.
- Reach out to and involve the elderly in the community.

Supervisor Bulova thanked the panelists and audience for their participation in the meeting. She reminded everyone that the final meeting of the Community Dialog will be held on June 9, 2004. Speakers will include Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly, Mason District Supervisor Penny Gross and Braddock District School Board Member Tessie Wilson. The Community Dialog series would end with members of the audience who had participated in a majority of the programs voting on a slate of recommendations.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:09 p.m.